

REDESIGNING PRINCIPAL INTERNSHIPS: PRACTICING PRINCIPALS' PERSPECTIVES*

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Abstract

Internship programs too often do not provide the types of experiences that effectively bridge the gap between theory and practice and prepare school leaders who are capable of leading and transforming schools. To help address this problem, the current study is directed at providing insight into practicing principals' views of the types of experiences and activities that future educational leaders should have in their preparation. Open, semi-structured interviews were conducted to reveal the perspectives of the practicing principals. From the perspectives of sitting principals, the study found that aspiring principals are not as well prepared as they need to be, and can be, to assume the challenging tasks of leading school improvement efforts. Practicing principals presented recommendations regarding the types of experiences and activities that should be included in the internship to adequately prepare future administrators. Their recommendations include opportunities to lead change initiatives, opportunities to build relationships with staff and data support of school improvement activities.

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2 Sumario en español

Los programas del puestos de interno con demasiada frecuencia no proporcionan los tipos de experiencias que recorren efectivamente el vacío entre teoría y práctica y preparan la escuela líderes que son capaces de dirigir y transformarse las escuelas. Para ayudar dirección este problema, el estudio actual es dirigido en proporcionar penetración en las vistas de directores practicantes de los tipos de experiencias y actividades que futuros líderes educativos deben tener en su preparación. Las entrevistas abiertas y medida estructuradas fueron realizadas para revelar las perspectivas de los directores practicantes. De las perspectivas de sentarse a directores, el estudio encontró que aspirando directores no son también preparado como deben ser, y puede ser, asumir las tareas desafiantes de esfuerzos primeros de mejora de escuela. Los directores practicantes presentaron recomendaciones con respecto a los tipos de experiencias y actividades que deben ser incluidas en el puestos de interno para preparar adecuadamente futuros a administradores. Sus recomendaciones incluyen oportunidades de dirigir cambio iniciativas, las oportunidades de construir las relaciones con apoyo de personal y datos de actividades de mejora de escuela.

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3 Introduction

Effective schools research of the 1980s identified the leadership of the principal as critical to school improvement (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Murphy & Hallinger, 1987; Restine, Milstein & Broffoff, 1989). With increased focus on student achievement in the 1990s, new accountability systems and a demand for changes in the preparation of future leaders emerged (National Commission for the Principalship, 1990). According to Cunningham, a key component of the reform movement is “Greater emphasis on making the knowledge-to-practice connections and providing students opportunities to work on real-world problems in the most authentic settings possible under the guidance of university faculty and experienced practitioners” (2007, p.3). As a result, reform efforts in the 1990s began to seek ways to strengthen internship programs (Bass, 1990; Foster & Ward, 1998; Milstein, Broffoff & Restine, 1991) and continued into the new century.

The positive influence of purposeful engagement in school leadership on the ability of principal candidates to later perform administrative roles is widely researched and accepted (Milstein & Krueger, 1997; Restine, Milstein & Broffoff, 1989). Numerous researchers (LaPlant, 1988; Milstein, Broffoff & Restine, 1991) conclude that the internship should allow the candidate to translate theoretical concepts into practice and learn from the consequences. In so doing, the internship can change perceptions about the principalship (White & Crow, 1993) and assist in developing important skills and professional behaviors (Cordeiro & Smith-Sloan, 1995).

While it is clear that the internship is integral to effective administrator preparation, many internships still do not offer the needed experiences that successfully prepare future leaders. Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr and Cohen (2007) conclude that “Efforts to provide field-based practicum experiences do not consistently provide candidates with a sustained hands-on internship in which they grapple with the real demands of school leadership under the supervision of a well-qualified mentor” (p. 6). Cunningham and Sherman (2008) recommended that “In the age of accountability, an emphasis must be placed on tasks that facilitate instructional leadership, school improvement, and student achievement – historically overlooked or nonexistent aspects of the internship” (p. 310). Engagement through the internship is indispensable to the socialization process that must occur for administrative leadership capacity building and transformation to follow (Browne-Ferrigno and Muth, 2004).

The Southern Regional Education Board's report, *Good Principals are the Key to Successful Schools* (2007), further emphasized the importance of real-world training. Field-based experiences must be a high priority and a central focus of principal preparation programs. The report concluded that:

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future principals need to get hands-on experience by working with school leadership teams as they investigate achievement gaps and work to solve them. The aspiring leaders would get practice in planning and initiating changes in curricula, teaching practices, student support services and school organization. By working on real problems and witnessing the results of strategic interventions, they would acquire the practical knowledge and understanding that are impossible to duplicate in lecture courses (p. 7).

Despite a growing increase in the number of internship programs in educational administration, there is little empirical data as to the types of experiences and activities that future educational leaders should have during their internship. This article aims at providing insight into practicing principals' subjective interpretations of the types of experiences and activities that should be included in internships for pre-service administrators.

Understanding practicing principals' perspectives as to the types of experiences and activities that should be included in the internship can shed light in re-designing meaningful internships at the university level as well as assist policymakers and school leaders in future planning. In addition, this study may assist in bridging the gap between theory and practice and promote a new era of future educational leaders capable of transforming schools.

4 Method

The method employed in the current study is based on a qualitative research paradigm as it lends itself to the systematic collection, organization and interpretation of data gained through interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Based on Erickson (1986), who stated that conceptions in qualitative research are revealed during data analysis, no defined hypothesis is tested in this study.

Specifically, two questions were asked of the practicing principals that participated in this study: (1) what internship experiences will enable future educational leaders to experience genuine responsibility for a variety of leadership activities?, and, (2) what are the types of activities that will enable future educational leaders to assume the responsibilities of a principal?

4.1 Participants

Forty-seven PreK-12 principals from a large county-wide school district in a southeastern state volunteered to participate in open, semi-structured interviews during the 2010-2011 academic year. The principals worked in schools ranging from 500 to 1800 students. Their length of experience ranged from 3 years to over 20 years. All had academic degrees with at least a master's degree in school administration. Eight held Educational Specialist degrees and 6 held doctoral degrees. Sixteen were male and 31 were female. Forty were required to complete a principal internship for their administrative certification while seven did not have such a requirement. Twenty-four responded that their internship was one semester in length; one responded that it was more than one semester. The remainder reported that their internships were more than one but less than two semesters in length.

4.2 Procedures

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with principals. The interviews lasted one hour and were conducted at each school site. The interviews were fully transcribed. The analysis aimed at identifying central themes in the data, searching for recurrent experiences, feelings and attitudes in order to code, reduce and connect different categories into central themes. The coding was based on the principles of comparative analysis which includes the comparison of any coded element in terms of emergent categories

and subcategories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It included the comparison of any coded element in terms of emergent categories and sub-categories. Lastly, all of the interview data were compared, leading to the identification of patterns.

5 Results

The analysis of the interview data revealed several themes emerging from the principals' perspectives as to the types of internship experiences and activities that will enable future educational leaders to assume the responsibilities of the principalship. The following themes emerged from the interview data: planning change in areas of curriculum and teaching, supporting cultures of learning and using data to support continuous school improvement. Aspiring principals need opportunities to lead change efforts, build relationships with staff and utilize data to support school improvement efforts. To illustrate the ideas emerging from the discussion, excerpts taken from the semi-structured interviews with principals are presented.

5.1 Planning Change in Areas of Curriculum and Teaching

Knowing about the change process is critical for future leaders of schools. Recognizing that change is very often a slow process, the organization, i.e. school, led by the principal, must determine that the proposed change will have long term effectiveness. Those who implement change must participate in the planning process in order to identify with and feel ownership.

The principals responded in different ways when describing effective change. One popular response was that future leaders need experiences with leading change efforts. As one middle school principal concluded, "One can never really understand the changes that occur in schools unless you lead the change efforts. Future principals need experience with leading these efforts, not just participating in them." One high school principal stated, "Change is so difficult and just being a participant, such as participating in a literacy initiative, does not give the future educational leader the necessary skills and knowledge to lead when it comes time. Interns need to have as many opportunities as possible to lead a variety of change initiatives."

The principals identified a variety of activities that they felt would provide principal candidates with knowledge of the change process in curriculum and teaching practices. It is worthy to note that all principals used the term "lead" rather than "participate" in planning change activities. These activities included leading a standing committee, leading a school initiative such as in the areas of math or literacy, developing a new program for teachers or students, and being involved with an activity in which they plan a program for exceptional and diverse students. One elementary principal commented, "I would allow the intern to lead almost any curriculum or teaching practice that would increase student achievement. They can't learn about planning change if they don't lead some real hands-on meaningful activities." Another high school principal responded in a slightly different manner stating, "It is so important that the intern truly be prepared to assume the role. It is time for internships to stop being about silly meaningless projects. No wonder we say that principals aren't ready to assume the role. Practice with leading change initiatives would be beneficial."

5.2 Supporting Cultures of Learning

All of the principals interviewed agreed that interns need experiences in how to support and nurture a learning culture and creating a school with a culture characterized by personal caring assisted in supporting students in meeting high standards. One elementary principal stated, "Interns need experience with building relationships and that means knowing every function of the school organization. You can't build a learning culture, if you don't know what it means to have one." Another high school principal responded, "During my internship, there were no hands-on experiences that I encountered in learning how to build a school culture. It was only when I became a principal that I truly understood how critical it was." As reported, principals need experiences in leading and facilitating efforts involving school culture. When they have experiences such as these, only then can they comprehend how to support and nurture a positive learning culture.

In addition to the experiences, the principals suggested a variety of activities for interns to lead that would promote a culture of learning. These included activities where they model effective instruction, lead

a school-community group, lead a parent group and conduct a climate audit as this would enhance both personal satisfaction and productivity of those who come to school to work and learn together. One middle school principal responded, "Give the intern a real, authentic activity to do. I think if they modeled an effective lesson, it creates a positive culture in the school." To gain a sense of culture of learning, interns need to be provided with authentic activities that help them understand the true meaning of a positive culture of learning in schools.

5.3 Using Data to Support Continuous School Improvement

Each principal interviewed felt that interns need to have real-world experiences with continuous improvement efforts based upon data and planning. Because schools today must be data driven, all principals stressed the need for interns to work with data for a variety of purposes. Specifically, they cited the three areas relating to curriculum, teaching practices and professional development as being especially important.

The importance of leading curriculum initiatives was strongly emphasized. An elementary principal stated, "By allowing interns to lead initiatives relating to curriculum, they should be more skilled and knowledgeable in order to initiate school reform measures." Several principals suggested that the intern create a data-supported lesson with a classroom teacher. One middle school principal stated, "Creating a lesson with a teacher certainly would provide an opportunity to become familiar with the curricula in our school." Other principals commented that the intern could supervise a curriculum revision. As an elementary principal observed, "Principals have to know about curriculum revision and alignment of the curriculum to the standards. Our district is emphatic that we are teaching the standards. This would be a great worthy activity for an intern."

All of the principals commented on the importance of leading school improvement efforts. Based upon relevant data, they believed that interns must have experiences with how to evaluate teaching practices and high quality instruction. These experiences must involve observing teachers and providing feedback for their professional growth. A high school principal stated, "Interns need experiences with the supervision of staff. This is a monumental task of the principal. Based upon the data, continual feedback is the only way to help the teacher professionally grow and develop." As one middle school principal identified, "Interns need exposure to teaching practices, strategies and better supervision and evaluation skills. If they had such experience during their internships, they would be better able to help their teachers and offer suggestions. They would be more confident and comfortable with this process." One popular suggestion was that interns conduct a sharing session of teaching practices. One high school principal responded in this manner, "Sharing best practices benefits not only the intern but also the staff. Relationships develop and grow."

Having experiences with professional development was also stressed. It is important that principals understand how adults learn and advance meaningful change through quality and sustained professional development. An elementary principal noted, "Based upon school improvement data, principals make many decisions. One of these decisions concerns the professional development of staff. My involvement was so limited in my internship. I think it can't be this way anymore." Another middle school principal responded in a slightly different manner, "If interns do not experience any data-driven opportunities such as professional development of staff, they will be far behind when seeking a principalship. What a disservice to them."

The principals relayed numerous activities that they felt would provide interns with valuable field-based opportunities in the areas of curriculum, professional teaching practices and professional development. All three of these areas impact continuous school improvement. Because schools today must be data driven, all principals stressed the need for interns to work with data for a variety of realistic purposes.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study reinforce that aspiring principals are not consistently given opportunities that will assist them in meeting the challenges of leading today's schools.

Furthermore, while this is a small-scale qualitative study, this study indicates that internship programs for future school leaders need to provide real-world learning opportunities for the modern school. Pounder and

Crow (2005) stress the importance of addressing the types of experiences and activities that an intern receives. They conclude that such efforts will contribute "to a stronger pipeline of effective school administrators" (p. 57). If principals are to share in the responsibility of meeting the educational needs of students and their communities, interns must be provided with the types of experiences and activities that facilitate instructional leadership, school improvement and student achievement.

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